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SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDING ASEC TAG)

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SUBJECT: Liberians Riot At Freetown UNHCR Office

Summary

¶1. On June 12, a small contingent of disgruntled Liberian refugees, including ex-combatants who were recently refused refugee status, led an assault on the Freetown UNHCR office. Police arrested 61 people, but only after approximately \$50,000 worth of damage was done to UNHCR vehicles and ground floor offices. Liberians who participated in the assault were frustrated over the fact that they had not been chosen for resettlement and claimed that Sierra Leoneans are fraudulently obtaining refugee status and being resettled. Although such claims are not without merit, they appear to have been misdirected at a low-level, local hire UNHCR staffer. The riot's ringleaders violence have been arrested, but UNHCR has advised caution around the July visit of Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) interviewers, who will interview 228 Liberian refugees for resettlement in the U.S. Renewed unrest among the old caseload of urban refugees is indeed possible, especially since some of the more recently arrived, camp-based refugees will soon be interviewed for resettlement. End Summary.

Liberian Refugees and Others Destroy
UNHCR Vehicles, Offices

¶2. On June 8, approximately 100 people gathered outside the Freetown UNHCR office on Wilkinson Road and blocked the entrance for approximately three hours. Bashir Fahmbulleh, who claimed to be the Chairman of Liberian refugees in Sierra Leone, later told a reporter that the reason for the protest was because a UNHCR employee was "selling refugee asylum privileges" to Sierra Leoneans for thousands of U.S. dollars and demanded that she be fired.

¶3. On June 12, a smaller but more violent group returned and broke into the UNHCR compound, smashed the windows of 23 UNHCR vehicles and plundered two of the ground floor UNHCR offices causing approximately \$50,000 worth of damage. Police arrested 61 people, charged 37, and are still looking for 8. Of those arrested, 17 were Liberian refugees, 13 were not, and 7 (including Fahmbulleh) were Liberian ex-combatants whose refugee status had been rejected.

¶4. UNHCR Representative for Sierra Leone Elike Segbor told PolOff that he had signed approximately 50 refugee status rejection letters to Liberian ex-combatants since his arrival in August 2005, most of them in the last two or three months. They are upset, Segbor said, because they have not been chosen for resettlement.

Where Were The Police?

¶5. Segbor told PolOff that after the first demonstration, UNHCR staff discovered that the refugees planned to demonstrate again. After reinforcing their security posture, UNHCR staff met with the police commissioner, who promised (and later failed) to send an extra contingent of officers. When the rioting started, only eight unarmed police officers were guarding the gates. (Note: Segbor said that a group of approximately 100 people had gathered the day before at the National Stadium to plan the raid, but bemoaned that the police had not picked up on it. We later learned that the Criminal Investigation Department did pick up intelligence on the upcoming raid, but that the Operational Support Department failed to act on it - and the warnings by UNHCR personnel. End Note.)

¶6. On June 12 just after 1200, Segbor said, rioters tried to break through the gates at the UNHCR office. The unarmed police, who had one radio among them, called for backup but there was no response. Between 50 and 60 demonstrators breached the gates at approximately 1225. Armed police arrived at approximately 1300 and were able to arrest some of the rioters, but by the time the police with riot gear arrived, the demonstration was over.

(Note: Key to the dispersal of the demonstrators was most likely a combination of the arrest of the ringleaders and a heavy rainstorm that began in the middle of the riot. End Note.)

Resettlement Fraud Claims, Although
Misdirected, May Have Merit

¶7. Fahmbulleh's claim that UNHCR local hire employee Inathorma Kumba was selling asylum privileges is not true, Segbor said. Kumba is a community services assistant and has no authority when it comes to recommending families for resettlement, he said.

¶8. That is not to say, however, that "asylum privileges" are not being sold, Segbor said. Although UNHCR takes as many precautions as it can to verify identity and eliminate imposters, there is only so far that safeguards can go. He has heard rumors, for example, that Liberian refugees selected for resettlement are selling spots for "family members" for \$1,000 to \$3,000. There are also imposters who claim to have been accepted for resettlement who reportedly charge \$1,000 to \$1,500 for selling (nonexistent) family slots.

July OPE Interviews
Merit Caution

¶9. Segbor said that his staff is identifying 228 refugees for Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) personnel to interview during the first week of July for resettlement in the U.S. Segbor said that during a recent conversation with IOM Chief of Mission Andrew Choga, he cautioned that IOM may want to increase security around the IOM compound for the duration of the interviews. (Note: Refugee screening interviews will probably be held in the IOM headquarters building in Freetown on Signal

Hill Road, close to the EMR and Embassy apartments. End Note.)

¶10. Unlike last year, Segbor said, UNHCR will be identifying refugees currently living in refugee camps for possible resettlement. (Note: The refugees living in camps arrived more recently than the refugees living in urban areas. In 2005, refugee interviewees were all selected from the urban refugee population. End Note.)

Comment

¶11. The violence on June 12 was likely triggered by the recent delivery of refugee status rejection letters to Liberian ex-combatants. There was plenty of frustration to go around, though, since not all of those arrested were ex-combatants or even recognized Liberian refugees. It is possible that UNHCR's decision to recommend more recently arrived camp-based refugees for resettlement could trigger more resentment and unrest among urban refugees (or those who consider themselves to be such). The arrest of the riot's ringleaders removes the immediate problem, but concerns about future outbreaks of violence from frustrated urban refugees, weak police response, and possible fraud within the resettlement program remain and will require the continued vigilance of UNHCR and other stakeholders, including the USG.

HULL